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FITTING IN BUT STICKING OUT: THE LIFE OF AN IMMIGRANT STUDENT AT PURDUE IN 1904



Lindy Schubring



YOUNG PEOPLE GROWING up in early twentieth-century America experienced exhilarating and trying times as the country developed economically, culturally, and socially. They lived through the second Industrial Revolution, two world wars, the Roaring Twenties, and the Great Depression. Important social change swept through America, which brought new inventions, new ideals, and new societal norms.

People in Indiana were not exempt from the changes occurring in the United States. In fact, they experienced much of this change firsthand. The Morrill Act of 1862 funded new land-grant universities, which gave

farmers and working-class people the option of receiving higher education in mechanics and agriculture. A more educated populous shaped the culture of not only Indiana, but also the rest of the country.

The idea of attending college daunts, yet excites, new students. As a college student myself, I understand the major transition that happens when one first moves away from home to go to college. It can be a challenge to find a niche in the larger university community, but once a student does so, he or she will create fond memories that will last a lifetime. Unfortunately, not everyone has a positive college experience and may desire to disconnect himself or herself from the university after graduation. One student from the Purdue University class of 1904 suffered such a fate. Hugo Alex Berthold lost contact with Purdue after graduation, suggesting that he did not have an enjoyable experience. He may not have relished his studies or extracurricular involvement; he may have had a prickly personality; or he may not have felt particularly nostalgic. Although we can never know for certain, evidence from the Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center as well as Purdue publications suggests that Hugo's immigrant status may have been the key factor that set him apart from his peers.

Hugo migrated with his family from Germany and settled in New York City. Despite being an immigrant, the editors of the *Debris*, Purdue's yearbook, described him as being "as thorough an American as any of us who have never been outside the limits of our own chicken yard."¹ The fact that Hugo's peers considered an immigrant like him an American may not seem significant to us today, but it was a high compliment in the early 1900s.

As a member of Purdue's class of 1904, Hugo studied electrical engineering. He had a large presence on campus, immersing himself in a variety of student clubs and organizations, in most of which he held leadership positions.² Hugo belonged to many student committees, including the 1904 Banquet Committee, the Military Ball Committee, and the Senior Banquet Committee. Hugo also seemed to enjoy writing. He actively participated in the Irving Literary Society for four years and worked as a reporter for the school newspaper, the *Exponent*. He handled money and finances as the treasurer of the Irving Literary Society his second year, as the class treasurer his latter two years, and as the advertising manager for the *Debris*. In addition, Hugo belonged to the Purdue branch of the American Institute of Electrical Engineers, the Minuet Club, and the Athletic Association.³ He also served as a

cadet captain. Hugo partook in a wide variety of student organizations, and he served the campus community continuously.

From the outside, Hugo appeared to have an enjoyable experience at Purdue. The unfortunate and perplexing aspect of Hugo's life is that he lost contact with the University after graduation. He did not attend class reunions and did not share information about his employment status. According to the Purdue alumni magazine, the *Alumnus*, thirty-one of his peers attended "Alumni Day" in March 1915, and as of June 1915, eighty-one of his peers subscribed to the magazine. Included in these lists are many students who belonged to the same organizations as Hugo and demonstrated a similar level of involvement within the student body. However, Hugo himself neither attended Alumni Day nor was included in the list of magazine subscribers.⁴ Despite his involvement on campus as a student, Hugo's immersion in University activities did not extend to his postgraduate life. The source of his ultimate disconnection could be rooted in his involvement in clubs, ethnic discrimination, or interactions with other students.

During Hugo's senior year, the *Exponent* published a letter in which an alumnus wrote to his younger brother, giving him advice about how to best spend

his time at Purdue. The alumnus recommended that his younger brother “go into college enterprises and do things outside [his] school work, not with the idea of getting honors, but for the mere pleasure of accomplishing something worthwhile.”⁵ A possible reason for Hugo’s detachment is that he was involved in too many activities at once, perhaps for honors, rather than interest. As a foreigner, Hugo probably tried his best to fit into the student body at Purdue and find his niche in the community. However, being involved in multiple clubs at once could have been overwhelming and counterproductive, leading to weaker connections with his peers, and ultimately making him feel excluded from the student body.

Another, perhaps more obvious, reason for Hugo’s disconnection could be that he did not have many friends at Purdue. Although cultural stereotypes may have affected Hugo greatly, the answer for his disappearance could simply lie in the fact that no one really liked him. Hugo was bold and outspoken, and these qualities may have deterred relationships with his classmates. The *Debris* described Hugo as “the champion leg puller” of the school. His persistence and boldness guaranteed he would get his way. The *Debris* includes an account of Hugo “wheedling the Commandant” into letting the students use the armory for the annual

Mechanics Burning.⁶ Hugo also was notorious for his temper. A line in a poem in the *Debris* reads: "What would you think / If you saw . . . / Berthold calm and possessed?"⁷ A report in the Irving Literary Society daily journal on May 20, 1904, documents an instance when the leaders of the society disciplined Hugo during a meeting. Two of the members, Mr. Grant and Mr. Herrick, were fined 25 cents (about \$6.58 today) for speaking during the extemporaneous speeches. Hugo, enraged by the injustice of this motion against his peers, was fined 5 cents for "misconduct during the discussion of this motion."⁸ Furthermore, a fictional story titled "A Wheel from the Head of a Famous '04" illustrates Hugo's aggression by describing a time when Hugo met with a *Debris* reporter to tell him of his breakthrough invention. Hugo had the great idea for something he called "Antisalt." If people found their food to be too salty, they could sprinkle Antisalt on it to negate the saltiness. Hugo argued his invention was critical for newlywed couples, where the wife was still learning how to cook properly. The most curious part of this story is the way in which Hugo told the *Debris* reporter about his idea. He forcefully pins the reporter against a wall to make him understand the importance of his invention.⁹ Although this story was fictional, it illustrates how Hugo's peers viewed

him as aggressive and found it entertaining to portray him in such a way.

No matter how American Hugo's peers viewed him to be, he was always remembered as an immigrant. There is an account in the *Debris* of Hugo using the word "stenographer" in place of the word "typewriter" during a meeting.¹⁰ It is possible that Hugo thought he was using the correct word to describe the physical typewriter, but accidentally confused it with the word describing the person who takes notes. Although misusing an English word was a simple mistake, Hugo's peers found it humorous nonetheless. Hugo's foreign roots made him an object of ridicule for his classmates, not necessarily because they wanted to be cruel, but rather, they found the cultural differences between themselves and their German classmate entertaining. Although their intentions were likely harmless, their words may have ended up really hurting Hugo.

Another possible explanation for Hugo's sudden disappearance is that he faced outright hostility from his fellow students and faculty because of his German roots. Feelings of unrest and resentment surged through America in the twentieth century, and with that came anti-German sentiments. These feelings infiltrated the culture through mass media, entertainment, and social interaction. Specifically, theater and public entertainment circulated cultural beliefs.

Popular theater includes vaudeville, burlesque, musical entertainment, circus, and minstrelsy. Compared to legitimate theater shows, which detailed grandiose tales of noble kings leading large armies into glorious battles, popular theater shows portrayed everyday tasks and relationships. At the turn of the century, serious playwriting shifted from melodrama to realism, which was “more vigorous, varied, and competent than ever before.”¹¹ Realism, as the name suggests, reflects everyday life, and it is a more approachable and relatable version of theater. Realistic plays were “rooted deeply in the polyglot character of America,” and thereby appealed to many people, including foreigners and infrequent theatergoers.¹² The United States saw exponential growth in the number of immigrants from the mid- to late 1800s, and this rapid growth increased the audience of theater shows.

Minstrel shows, although notoriously offensive in content, played an important part in American culture because they “provided their audiences with one of the only bases that many of them had for understanding America’s increasing ethnic diversity.”¹³ The performances influenced the American people’s understanding of different cultures, but they often did so in an untruthful, exaggerated way. Minstrel performances typically are understood to mean only blackface act-

ing, but their repertoire expanded beyond that. Minstrels also gave performances ridiculing European and Asian immigrants. Because of the entertaining nature of the shows, they exaggerated the immigrants' peculiar features and downplayed or ignored presumably more "American" ones. Consequently, they embedded stereotypes into their audiences' minds.

As theater historian Robert C. Toll notes, out of all the immigrants, minstrels treated Germans the most kindly. They portrayed Germans as hardworking, practical people, whose only faults were that they drank too much lager and ate too much sauerkraut and sausage. Despite their "hefty physiques and even heftier appetites," minstrels represented Germans as being very courteous, almost enough to be an example for American citizens.¹⁴ In fact, "Germans fit so well into white American values and world-view that they served as model immigrants."¹⁵ They gained respect from their fellow Americans because "they earned themselves a place . . . by fighting valiantly for the Union."¹⁶ Therefore, the minstrels portrayed Germans as positively as they could while still making their performances entertaining.¹⁷ The fact that Germans were white-skinned also made them more easily acceptable than African Americans or Asians, for example. Nevertheless, Germans on stage were still treated stereotypically.

Moreover, the fact that Germans received relatively fair treatment on the stage did not free them from hostility in the real world. The anxiety building up to World War I sparked anti-German sentiments throughout the country. Americans forced Germans to change the names of their businesses, change their own names, and to speak English, rather than German, in public areas. This harsh treatment continued until the United States declared war on Germany in 1917, when the flame of anti-German attitudes blazed into a raging fire. Many German shops closed, and concert programs and weddings no longer played German music. Furthermore, "Americans who spoke German were threatened with violence or boycotts."¹⁸ Even though minstrels specifically did not paint Germans in a very harsh light, that did not mean the rest of society followed their lead in the early part of the twentieth century.

Noncommercial theaters became popular on college campuses in the 1920s. Purdue had its own active minstrel society, the Purdue Thermo Minstrels. They performed a couple of times throughout the school year, and their performances would often benefit the Athletic Association. The 1904 *Debris* contains a program of the Thermo Minstrels' performances.¹⁹ Most notably, the *Olio*, or miscellaneous collection, included

a piece titled “German Comedians.” It is safe to assume this show would seem offensive to us today, and the hostility may have been extreme enough to encourage Hugo to disconnect himself from Purdue in 1904. If “German Comedians” documented Germans similarly to other American minstrel shows, Hugo may or may not have felt offended by the content in the show. However, that does not mean that Hugo did not feel resentment from his peers on a daily basis. We cannot accurately judge the severity of anti-German sentiment on Purdue’s campus, but it could have been cruel enough to foster Hugo’s disconnection.

Evidence from the Purdue *Alumni Directory* suggests that Hugo lived a fulfilling life after graduation. Hugo resided on a small farm near Calgary, Alberta, for two years. He rented the farm out before moving to New York City to work as an assistant manager of Duhrrsen and Pfaltz, an electrical company operated by first-generation Germans.²⁰ Because Hugo was included among the “lost graduates,” the information about his employment was provided secondhand.²¹ Even though Hugo found a stable job after graduation, he did not share his successes with the University.

From the outside, Hugo seemed to fare well both as a student at Purdue and after graduation. However, Hugo did not invest as much in the University upon

graduation as did most of his peers. A possible explanation for his lack of involvement is that Hugo did not have an enjoyable experience at Purdue, and thus, he desired to disassociate himself with the University. A variety of factors could have encouraged his ultimate disconnection: being involved in too many extracurriculars at once, a poor relationship with his peers, and ethnic discrimination on campus. Another possible but entirely different explanation could be that Hugo became very busy after graduation and simply did not have the time or resources to attend class reunions or donate money to the University. The unfortunate aspect of Hugo's life lies in the fact that a seemingly successful and happy individual desired to distance himself from his alma mater. Hugo seemed to fit well into student life at Purdue, but because of his German roots, he stood apart from the rest of his peers. This isolation could have been severe enough to cause Hugo to separate himself from the University. Even if he was not happy while he attended Purdue University, I can only hope that Hugo found happiness in the rest of his life.

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Notes

1. *Debris*, 1904, the Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center, Purdue University Libraries.

2. *Ibid.*, 69.

3. Most members of the Athletic Association were on the train that suffered the terrible accident on October 31, 1903. There is a heart-wrenching telegram from Hugo's father desperately asking President Stone whether or not his son was on the train. Hugo was not listed among the injured, but it is unknown whether or not he was on board at the time of the accident. Telegram on October 31, 1903, Series 1, Box 13-14, Winthrop E. Stone Papers, 1870s-1920s, the Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center, Purdue University Libraries.

4. Purdue *Alumni Bulletin*, April 1909–June 1915, the Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center, Purdue University Libraries.

5. Jack, “A Letter of Advice,” *Exponent* (West Lafayette, IN), Dec. 9, 1903.

6. *Ibid.*, 276. The annual Mechanics Burning was a student ritual in which the seniors performed a mock funeral ceremony and burned an effigy of the author of their hydraulics textbook.

7. Ibid., 300.

8. Irving Literary Society Papers 1875-1925, the Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center, Purdue University Libraries.

9. *Debris*, 1904, 263.

10. Ibid., 301.

11. Garff B. Wilson, *Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre: From Ye Bare and Ye Cubb to Chorus Line* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1982).

12. Ibid., 122.

13. Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

14. Ibid., 173.

15. Ibid., 175.

16. Ibid., 174.

17. Minstrels mainly mocked the obscurity of German language in their shows. Other media, including texts like “The Awful German Language,” a short story by Mark Twain, mocked the language as well. In this story, Twain points out the flaws in the German language in a humorous but not overly disrespectful way.

18. “Shadows of War,” *Library of Congress*, accessed November 30, 2013, <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/immigration/german8.html>.

19. *Debris*, 1904, 184–85.

20. “Purdue Alumni Directory 1875–1934,” the Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center, Purdue University.

21. Purdue *Alumni Magazine* 1914–1915, the Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center, Purdue University Libraries.

